Article:
Mehtta, M. (2021) Crab antics: the moral and political economy of greed accusations in the submerging Sundarbans delta of India. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute. ISSN 1359-0987

https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13551

JRAI Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute

Crab antics: the moral and political economy of greed accusations in the submerging Sundarbans delta of India

Megnaa Mehtta *University of Sheffield*

The livelihood of crab collecting, practised for generations in the Sundarbans forest of India, has undergone a radical moral makeover in recent years. Largely landless crab fishers are now the subject of frequent public denunciations by local authorities for their supposed greed and reckless endangerment of the entire ecosystem. While greed and its related category of need emerge from a local moral ecology of the region, internationally funded conservation campaigns and recent disruptions in the global crab supply chain reveal how accusations are activated and the means through which they play out amidst pre-existing village hierarchies. This article accounts for the political, economic, and moral shifts that underpin these accusations. In counterpoint, I present the defences of the accused, and explore crab collectors' notions of a sufficient life and the rich moral distinctions they themselves make between greed (*lobh*), need (*aubhav*), desire (*chahida*), and habit (*swabhav*). I then step back to show the broader political contours that shape the discourse of 'greedy' crab collectors. I argue that both the conservation movement and allied state actors have distorted the material and moral resources intended to combat climate change and other environmental threats by scapegoating the politically disenfranchised: local fishers. Powerful stakeholders, as a result of their own political impotency, are deployed in a game of crab antics that fails to address the underlying environmental catastrophe while displacing the psychic burden of greed onto the poor.

> Crab antics is behaviour that resembles that of a number of crabs who, having been placed in a barrel, all try to climb out. But as one nears the top, the one below pulls him down in his own effort to climb. Only a particularly strong crab ever climbs out – the rest, in the long run, remain in the same place.
>
> Peter J. Wilson, *Crab antics* (1973: 58)

Nirmal da[1] is a range officer stationed in one of the furthest outposts of a mangrove forest that, courtesy of its large population of Bengal tigers, is also one of India's most important wildlife sanctuaries. His main responsibility, like other Forest Department officials in his position, is to patrol the seemingly ceaseless labyrinth of river creeks to keep out illegal fishers (Figs 1 and 2).[2] The window of his office looks out onto a junkyard piled high with the confiscated wooden boats (*naukas*) of those unfortunate

Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) **0**, *1-25*

Figure 1. Crab collecting by line and bait in the mangrove creeks. (Photo: Megnaa Mehtta.)

enough to have been caught (Fig. 3). Pointing to the pile, the dilapidated remains of dozens of fishing households' most valued economic assets, I asked Nirmal da if he thought the Forest Department's policy of boat seizure, along with levying fines and confiscating their catch, was justified.

His response was unexpected:

> Crab collectors are greedy. Do you know how high the value (*daam*) of crabs is these days? Collecting crabs has got them into an addiction (*nesha*) of money. You see they won't do daily wage [labour]. They've become addicted to easy money … a few hours of sitting [on a boat] can make them Rs 800 [GBP 8], labourers have to do eight hours of work to make Rs 250 [GBP 2.5, referring to the daily minimum wage].

The Forest Department, in his view, was doing the fishers a favour: 'We are preventing them from taking risks, we are saving their lives … after all it is greed (*lobh*) that kills man'.

Nirmal da does not primarily refer to protecting wildlife or enforcing the law, but instead builds a *moral* case against the fishers that justifies their punishment. During the course of fieldwork,[3] I found these accusations of greed and moral profligacy fascinating and perplexing. Not a single conservationist or Forest Department representative cited any study quantifying the damaging effect of the crab collectors on the mangrove ecosystem. So why was it that the crab collectors of the Sundarbans, the majority landless, lower caste, and practising this risky livelihood for generations, were suddenly being accused of greed? In response to this accusation, how did crab collectors justify the pursuit of their own livelihoods?

This article seeks to make sense of this paradoxical accusation, as well as the justifications and defences put forth by the 'accused'. I do this by exploring the moral economies (Fassin 2009) of what comes to be seen as sufficient and excessive while

Figure 2. Rangers of the Forest Department patrolling the mangrove creeks in search of 'trespassing' crab collecting and fishing boats. (Photo: Megnaa Mehtta.)

Figure 3. Crab collectors' non-motorized wooden boats (*naukas*). Customarily, three individuals will spend anything between seven and ten days living on these boats while collecting crabs in the mangrove creeks. (Photo: Megnaa Mehtta.)

simultaneously situating this paradox within anthropology's long-standing tradition of studying accusations. Anthropologists have tried to explore consumption, aspirations, and desire through a range of lenses, from Sahlins's (1972) 'original affluent society' and the debates around scarcity and abundance among hunter gatherers to the exploration of frugality, ascetic ideals, and excess in the thoughts and practices of Gandhi, Thoreau, and Nietzsche (Singh 2010). Appadurai (2004) has argued for locating the 'capacity to aspire' within specific cultural maps of desire, while others have tried to ask neighbouring questions by exploring the particular ways in which one might come to define a prosperous life (H.L. Moore 2015; H.L. Moore & Woodcraft 2019; see also Corsín Jiménez 2008). This article is interested in the philosophical notions of sufficiency, but it does so not through Aristotle's *Nicomachean ethics*, Rawls's *Theory of justice*, or Sen's 'capabilities approach' (1999), each with their distinct entry points into the constraints and possibilities of human flourishing. Instead I query sufficiency or 'enoughness' (Princen 2005) through the precise vocabularies of Sundarbans residents nested within their moral ecology.

Simultaneously, this article situates the indictments against 'greedy' crab collectors within long-standing scholarship where understanding accusations comes to reveal a much wider set of dilemmas in society. From feminist scholars investigating the witch-hunts in Europe in the transition from feudalism to capitalism (Federici 1998) to similar processes in the late twentieth and twenty-first century as a result of 'new enclosures' (de Angelis & Harvie 2014) in the form of 'green grabs' (Fairhead, Leach & Scoones 2012), investigating accusations is an entry point into larger structural processes generating inequality. This is seen to be the case from inquiries into the local factors underlying charges of witchcraft and their accompanying occult economies (e.g Comaroff & Comaroff 2002; Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]) to the more recent policing and unfounded blame of unfettered consumerism leading to indebtedness (James 2014).

Accusations also seem to have their own temporal rhythms. At the time of fieldwork, 'new money' linked to recent shifts in global supply chains had converted crab collectors from one of the poorest and with the most precarious livelihood on the island to a position of relative wealth – relative, that is, in relation to their own previous positions of poverty.[4] Crab collectors became slightly wealthier and bucked usual hierarchies vis-à-vis the local elite, and incited visceral accusations of greed and recklessness. The accusations of greed generated enduring 'ugly feelings' (Ngai 2005) indicting not just an individual but an entire occupation and a means of making a living. As a result, this was a propitious moment to understand the moral and socioeconomic deliberations of these crab collectors in relation to others: conservationists, Forest Department officials, and their own neighbours.

In investigating the inter- and intra-community power relations and social structures that create and contest the narrative of greedy crab collectors, I show how accusations become a strategic device in specific social groups' – local elites and middle classes – power-plays with one another (Oka & Kuijt 2014; Robertson 2001). This is especially the case as they attempt to distribute culpability selectively and reinforce established local hierarchies, reproducing global and historical narratives of the undeserving and lazy poor (see Skeggs 2005; Wacquant 2009).

From probing this first paradox and making visible the processes, rationalities, and temporalities through which accusations arise and which groups manage to avoid such moral condemnation, I also broaden my argument to address a second paradox. The

discourse of greed – a key tool in global efforts to assign responsibility for environmental degradation and overconsumption – has backfired to indict the most vulnerable people in the Sundarbans. While widespread environmental threats, and their concomitant calls for stringent biodiversity conservation (E.O. Wilson 2016; Dinerstein *et al.* 2020), have attracted enormous material and moral resources, conservation movements and allied stakeholders have failed, in places like the Sundarbans, to confront the structural economic and political forces that have led to environmental degradation in the first place (see Barrios 2017) and instead channelled their resources along prevailing fault lines of power.

This article reveals the processes through which some of the most marginalized in society seem forced to bear the psychic burden of society's self-admitted ills, wrestling with deep ethical quandaries involving infinitesimally small slivers of humanity's resource base while attracting vastly disproportionate interest. In looking firstly at the village, and then at the international conservation movement, the lens of greed magnifies pre-existing hierarchies, inequalities, and the notion of culpability in these 'catastrophic times'. Accusations and their defences, as this article shows, while being embedded within quotidian village life, and its local ecology of morals, are also deeply entangled in complex global flows of international conservation and interconnected supply chains drawing attention to how 'ugly emotions' partake in a broader project of moral policing (see also Hughes, Mehtta, Bresciani & Strange 2019).

In the sections that follow, I first unpack the socioeconomic context within which accusations arise, revealing how local hierarchies shape-shift as a result of altered crab value chains and the ingress of 'new money'. In response to these accusations, I explore the defences of the accused, and the sophisticated differences that crab collectors themselves make between ideas of greed (*lobh*), need (*aubhav*), desire (*chahida*), and habit (*swabhav*). The last section of this article shows how imputing blame to crab collectors is a form of scapegoating which conceals the political impotency of powerful stakeholders in addressing what are far more egregious threats to the ecosystem. Before moving onto my ethnography, the next section provides a brief introduction to the Sundarbans.

The Sundarbans: from being pathologized to becoming pristine

The Sundarbans is a region that consists of the largest last remaining mangrove forest in the world comprising fifty-two inhabited islands with a population of 4.4 million people (according to the 2011 Census of India) belonging to a variety of lower caste groups (Fig. 4). The majority of crab collectors are *Poundra Kshatriya* and *Namasudra*, or formerly 'untouchable' caste groups within the government nomenclature of Schedule Caste (SC). The bulk of the region's inhabitants are refugees from current-day Bangladesh and other parts of West Bengal who made this delta their home as a result of political upheavals or ecological calamities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Jalais 2010; see also Sur 2021). Adjacent to densely populated villages are islands riven by a labyrinth of river creeks and forested sandbanks. The forest is itself a river that swells and shrivels with the twice-daily tide. It is a unique ecosystem, not least because it is the only mangrove forest in the world that is home to a flagship conservation species: tigers.

Sundarbans tigers are maneaters and are known to kill anything from fifty to a hundred individuals each year (Sanyal 2001).[5] The Forest Department professes concern to prevent the loss of human life from tiger attacks; yet this is in a context

Figure 4. The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove delta, ranging across the borders of India and Bangladesh. (This map was made by Faiza Ahmed Khan for my use.)

where less sensational deaths (e.g. from snakebites) far outstrip mortalities from tigers ([Aditya] Ghosh 2017: 116). Common illnesses, for example, claim a much higher number of lives, yet the island in which I conducted fieldwork – home to 40,000 people – did not have a single government primary healthcare centre.

The region was described in colonial records as a 'sodden wasteland' with an inscrutable geography where tigers were a 'menace to be exterminated' (Hunter 1973

[1875]). Today it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site regarded as a natural wonder of the world (Jalais 2007; 2008). In the course of a century, the valuation of the region has shifted from being considered rife with disease and 'pathology' (Martin 1837; see also Bhattacharyya 2018: 19) to being a global conservation hotspot, paraded in tourist brochures as a 'pristine' forest.

The Forest Department's exploitative relationship with the Sundarbans forest, and attitude towards the tiger, took little notice of Independence. As most environmental scholarship on India has emphasized, postcolonial forestry was largely an extension of colonial forest laws, a pattern prevalent across many other colonies – where forests fuelled industrialization and economic growth in the postcolony as they had for the colonizers (Gadgil & Guha 1995). The Forest Department governed the Sundarbans forest, and maintained a dominant, exclusive right to exploit its resources to enrich the state.

A turning point in the transformation of the Sundarbans in the ecological imaginary was the 1972 Wildlife Protection Act of India (WPA), which echoed the classic 'parks vs people' conflict that plagues many parts of the world today (see West, Igoe & Brockington 2006). The WPA carved the deltaic expanse into three zones: a large core area, with no human activity permitted; a sanctuary area for tourists and the tiger; and a small buffer area, where fishers and crab and honey collectors can seek a legal livelihood from the jungle. The conservation movement, which lobbied strongly for this zoning, is thus both politically and economically intertwined with the Forest Department (see Mukhopadhyay 2016). For those who live by fishing and foraging in the jungle, this zoning made large swathes of the forest, often directly in front of their homes, out of bounds after 1972.

Simultaneously, another discourse through which ecological uncertainty is interpreted in the delta in the age of the 'Anthropocene' is that of climate change (see Khan 2014; 2019). With a rate of sea-level rise higher than the global average (Hazra, Ghosh, Dasgupta & Sen 2002), climate threat has become an overarching framework to understand life in the delta even as this overlooks several other long-standing risks and everyday vulnerabilities of the region (Bhattacharyya & Mehtta 2020). Residents of the Bengal delta conceptualize climate change quite differently from those in the corridors of power among international development organizations, bureaucrats, and climate scientists, and also express that experience through very distinct vocabularies and emotions (Dewan 2021; see also Paul & Baindur 2016). Nevertheless, the image of climactic catastrophe and 'anticipatory ruination' (Paprocki 2019; see also Cons 2018) has allowed the region to attract funds from several international organizations, such as the WWF, the World Bank Group, the International Water Association (IWA), and innumerable others, in order to conserve its biodiversity and defend against the effects of climate change. The language on the World Bank's website is urgent: 'Unless we act now, the priceless Sundarbans will disappear within a few generations'.[6]

The next section follows one of the campaigns that seeks to 'act now' so as to 'conserve' the Sundarbans forest. We see how alongside physical enclosures, the Forest Department and conservationists combine paternalism with scapegoating that puts the psychic burden of greed, risk, and recklessness onto the poorest and weakest. Such a narrative is nested within the local ecology of morals while also being shaped by economic, political, and discursive international flows.

The accusation: 'Less work, more income – this is what is killing you'

In September 2016, a year into fieldwork, I spent a few days on a Forest Department boat, shadowing a 'conservation' campaign – aimed at keeping fishers out of the forest – as it travelled from island to island. Our boat was a rundown wooden shell with stove and sink next to the four-cylinder engine acting as a kitchen. Behind a flimsy partition was a room with seven mattresses that served as our boat-dormitory for the next few nights. Besides me, there were six men on board: three forest rangers, the hired boatman, a small-time local politician and nominal head of the Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC),[7] and Shomit Mondol. Shomit da, the campaign's most vocal member, was present as a conservationist, a field officer of a prominent wildlife conservation NGO with a strong presence in my fieldsite. It was through Shomit da that I got invited to shadow the campaign.

The team's mission was to meet with local fishers and 'forest-dependent' communities so as to 'save the forest' and 'spread awareness for protecting wildlife'. This kind of outreach was mandatory for the Forest Department, an attempt to remedy exclusionary practices of 'fortress conservation' (Brockington 2002; West *et al.* 2006) with a more 'inclusive' approach. The mantra for these campaigns, printed on shirts and caps worn by conservation NGO and tourist lodge staff – often the very same people – was punchy: 'In saving the tiger, we save ourselves' (*bagh bachbey, aamra bachbo*).

The words of the head ranger capture the core of the campaign's stump speech:

> We don't want you to risk your lives [from tiger attacks]. Crab collecting is converting your wives into widows … Think about the future of your children. In order to do less hard work, you are going into the creeks for more money … this is killing you. We don't want your families to suffer.

Emphasis was placed on the pain of widowed women and bereft children. Shomit da would often reiterate and sharpen this point:

> Don't be greedy (*lobh kora na*). So many people are dying because of tiger attacks and yet you go deeper into the forest creeks. Don't you value your lives? Those of you who go out of greed want to collect the biggest crabs … If you can live off 4,000 rupees [GBP 40] a month, why are you trying to make 20,000 [GBP 200]?

Case studies followed, citing so-and-so in such-and-such a village who had died recently from a tiger attack. Greed, ran the subtext, is ruining families. Each meeting invariably ended with the same message: only by limiting greed and avoiding crab collecting could people ultimately 'save the forest, [and] save the tiger'.

After a full day of proselytizing, and having left the corners of several villages duly strewn with our plastic teacups, we would retire to our boat. Over meals, our conversations would turn more informal. As we traversed the rivers from one village to another, a second, concealed narrative emerged. This narrative let go of the public emphasis on the risks of crab collecting, focusing instead on how much money the crab collectors were making. The chain of causality between putting an end to crab collecting and 'saving the forest' continued to become even more unclear. Of all the campaigners, Shomit da's accusations were the most damning.

> Crab collecting is a form of stealing (*churi*) … They do two hours of work and make Rs 1,000 [GBP 10]. Others work all day and make Rs 250 [GBP 2.5, the minimum daily wage]. They are doing this work out of greed (*lobh*). They are thieves (*chor*). People die because of greed (*manush lobhey morrey*).

In the same breath, without a pause, he asked me if the next time I left my fieldsite I could buy him an iPhone since 'every other village lad (*gramer cheley*) had this phone'.

The junior ranger looked at Shomit da's Samsung phone and concurred: 'Yes this phone … you should get a better one. All these fishers and crab collectors have this phone now (*ja maach kangda dhorey unaar kachey o ache*)'. Such discussions were interspersed with comments about the high price of crabs with stories of particular crab collecting households' new assets, new saris worn by the women, and their expenditures on religious festivals (*pujos*).

A closer look at why, exactly, the Forest Department wants to keep fishers out of the forest reveals three main worries. First, conservation has become a new source of livelihood in the Sundarbans with local work opportunities being tied to the bourgeoning business of 'eco-tourism' and conservation. Second, senior Forest Department officials seem genuinely concerned that tigers could be injured by fishers. Fishing boats usually have a *laathi* (wooden staff) used for steering. It is impossible for crab collectors to kill a tiger with a wooden staff; there is, however, a somewhat plausible – if small – chance of potential injury. If asked directly what other harm crab collectors cause, answers are usually vague: 'In the event of a tiger attacking a fisherman, a tiger might get hurt' or 'If the boat is in the creek, it can obstruct the tiger's path'. Most officials, blindly repeat the law: 'It is a core area, meant only for the tiger. Crab collectors are breaking the law'. The third, more powerful fear is that the death of a fisher might increase the enmity (*shatruta*) between tigers and people.

In the current scenario in the Sundarbans, the rationale for caring about human lives is to protect animal ones. However, at the level of the village, the physical policing is accompanied by a moralizing discourse of greedy crab collectors which stems from localized feelings of envy (*hinghsa*). Higher monetary values of crabs, due to changes in the global supply chain, have upset local hierarchies in the village, leading to a backlash against crab collectors.

The economics of the accusation: China's New Year is the Sundarbans' new money

Within the local moral ecology of the Sundarbans, the origins of the accusation of greed lie in the recent *relative* prosperity of crab collectors. This prosperity is a result of two major disruptions to the crab value chain, which I followed from the crab collectors' fragile wooden boats to the cavernous export houses of Kolkata (Fig. 5). The first disruptive moment occurred approximately eight years ago and is described by players across the value chain – middlemen, commission agents, wholesalers, and exporters – as 'the opening up of the Chinese market'. Live mud crabs from the Sundarbans have been an export commodity since 1997. However, as direct flight connectivity between India and China improved, the export market in live mud crabs skyrocketed. Chinese and other South East Asian markets' appetite for crabs and the temporalities of demand have an enormous influence on quotidian economic life and household expenditures in Sundarbans villages. In fact, crab prices in the Sundarbans fluctuate in sync with the Chinese festival calendar, peaking in the winter months around the Chinese New Year.

The Bengal delta has been linked to global supply chains for several centuries (Ali 2018), the major difference being that in the recent decades, highly perishable commodities – like tiger prawn seeds or shrimp and mud crabs – have been able to make these long-distance journeys on flights. Mohsin, the owner of an export house in the Baghajatin neighbourhood of Kolkata (where all the major export houses are headquartered), says in reference to the Chinese New Year: 'It is a festive season in China, like our Durga *pujo* [Bengali annual religious festival] … We go to fairs

Figure 5. Weighing, sorting, and packing crabs at export houses in Kolkata in preparation for their onward journeys to Chinese markets. (Photo: Megnaa Mehtta.)

(*melas*/*pandals*), they go to restaurants, buyers will pay whatever for crabs, especially female crabs with eggs … the prices go up. It is a good time of the year for us'. In WhatsApp messages on his mobile, Mohsin points out conversations in Chinese characters with pride, as evidence of past negotiations with Chinese buyers. The Chinese market had come to dominate the demand side of the crab value chain so much that Mohsin had learned Mandarin.

The second major disruption benefiting crab collectors occurred on the value chain's supply side. Before the 'Chinese market opened', relatively low demand and poor flight connections had allowed four export houses to dominate the market. These companies exercised monopsony power, buying crabs from their various suppliers on credit, and eventually paying a price (depending on their profit margin) often incommensurate with the fair rate prevailing in global markets. However, the entry of one particular export house – Dolon International – upended this relationship. Rajiv Bose, the owner

of Dolon International, introduced two major innovations: crab collection centres in several Sundarbans villages, cutting out middlemen; and guaranteeing payment upfront to collectors, as opposed to the prevailing practice of buying crabs on credit and later paying prices incommensurate with the market rate. Simultaneously, the penetration of cell phones allowed crab collectors to check the market rate for their catch and get better prices as a result.

Taken together, higher demand from China and more competitive relationships on the supply side have redistributed market power and higher profits all the way down to the marginal crab collectors of the Sundarbans.[8] As a result, crab collectors can now consistently earn more than low-paid workers, such as daily wage labourers, and on occasion even equal the salaries of the local elite, comprised of government employees, shopkeepers, local politicians, and conservation NGO and eco-tourism staff. From November through to January, in the lead-up to the Chinese New Year, one quintal of crabs (100 kilograms) can sell for up to Rs 90,000-120,000 (GBP 900-1,200), and in the low season for Rs 15,000-20,000 (GBP 150-200). If one is lucky, a quintal of crabs can be caught in two weeks, and profits are split amongst three people. After netting out the sizeable upfront investments and costs incurred during crab collecting, and viewed in the context of the same households that otherwise ran on an average of Rs 3,000-4,000 (GBP 30-40) per month, earning Rs 15,000-20,000 rupees (GBP 150-200) in two weeks is a major return and surpasses the earnings of most other occupations on the island.[9]

Crab collectors' new wealth has underwritten a variety of previously impossible expenditures. For instance, almost all collectors have begun to save money to convert their mud huts into brick homes, and to replace hay roofs with materials that they think can better withstand the region's cyclones. In more subtle ways, new spending has also allowed crab collectors to erode historical patron-client relationships that define the political, social, and economic links between the local elite and the poor in rural India (e.g. Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava & René 2005; Gupta 2012). This is readily visible in regard to annual *pujos* or religious festivals, formerly funded and programmed by 'big men'. Many crab collectors now self-finance their *pujos*, reflecting their increased financial self-sufficiency and cultural autonomy. The local elite's reaction, and envy (*hingsha*), is largely delivered through a moralizing discourse around greed and reckless risk.

The bio-moral basis of the accusation, or who calls whom greedy

The social positions of the accusers and accused powerfully mediate the changing economics of crab collecting. Put simply, to fully understand the charge of greed levelled by the accusers, it is first necessary to know who they are. Who blames whom, and why?

Shomit da, the most vocal member on the conservation campaign I described earlier, was born and raised in the Sundarbans, and also belongs to the lower-caste *Poundra Kshatriya* or what the government classifies as a Scheduled Caste (SC) community. Conservation work, however, has allowed him to travel across the world for conferences and trainings. His wife and younger son live in Canning, a town between the Sundarbans and Kolkata, where, after years of saving money, he has been able to complete the construction of a four-storey house. He owns two tourist boats, helps run a tourist lodge on land that he owns, and heads the local chapter of a wildlife NGO. National newspapers describe him as a local messiah, 'a poacher-turned-conservationist'.

Immensely charismatic, Shomit da networks with ministers, brokers relationships between biologists and journalists, and raises funds from philanthropists and businessmen. He is best described as somewhere between a politician, a broker, and a fixer who receives his backing not from political parties but from the Forest Department and international conservation NGOs, arguably the foremost powers in the Indian Sundarbans. While national and international conservation NGOs liked to consider him as the 'son of the soil', their 'local stakeholder', he liked to project himself as an international conservation icon and the village 'big man'.

As a member of today's local elite, what he and the forest rangers abhor is how access to easy money has changed crab collectors' material and social aspirations. What was the problem, I queried, if crab collectors wanted for themselves the same recognizable aspirations for upward mobility as he did for his own family? For Shomit da, however, these exact same aspirations were unfounded when coming from crab collectors. Like Nirmal da, the range officer with whom I started this article, Shomit da's favourite way of characterizing the crab collectors' greed was to rhetorically state: 'If you can live off 4,000 rupees [GBP 40] a month, why are you trying to make 20,000 [GBP 200]?' The sentiment is that crab collectors shouldn't aspire for more; instead, they should stay where they belong. And the implicit answer was that they belonged in poverty. Badal da, a crab collector in his early forties, interpreted Shomit da's policing to me in the following way: 'We are poor and they [referring to the Shomit da and other local conservationists] want us to remain poor'. This is perhaps a classic example of how subordinate groups face adverse 'terms of recognition' (Appadurai 2004) from dominant groups within a local hierarchy. Why should crab collectors not aspire to access healthcare, want their children to get ahead, and be able to provide more secure brick homes for their family?

The policing of everyday economic, social, and political aspirations is not a new story in the Sundarbans. Today's crabs were yesterday's prawns or shrimp. At the time Jalais (2010; 2017; see also Mukhopadhyay 2016) did fieldwork in a neighbouring island of the region, prawns commanded a premium on global markets. Pulling nets for prawn seeds along the riverbank was eventually banned due to the environmental damage it caused to mangrove biota and fish stocks (Jalais 2017: 137). Jalais points out that alongside this real collateral environmental damage, prawn seed collecting was a livelihood that mostly benefited poor women. Their marginal social and economic independence changed household and neighbourhood dynamics, creating a backlash that accompanied the environmental one. Similarly, mud crabs not only benefit private export houses but are also an integral part of the foreign exchange and revenue generated for the Indian government.[10] Crab collectors, compared to all the other actors, had the smallest share of financial gains whilst attracting the most accusations. These charges are a part of a cycle of intertwined moral accusations and environmental policy-making aimed at policing the upwardly mobile poor.

Furthermore, the paternalism of the Forest Department and local conservationists is only directed towards select livelihoods. Honey collecting, carried out in the same forest and known to be much riskier – for it requires walking the forest floor and therefore is more exposed to tiger attacks – was not demonized during my time in the field. The honey collected is sold back to the Forest Department, and is a 'non-timber forest product' owned by the Forest Department itself. Honey makes relatively little profit (compared to crabs) and at the time of fieldwork did not have large financial returns

for collectors. It seemed as if only forms of work that are both risky and make money, like crab collecting, are labelled as greedy.

This sits alongside other moral economies of accusation in South Asia, where hazardous forms of work like ship-breaking (see Bear 2015), manual scavenging (Coffey & Spears 2017), or waste-picking (Harriss-White 2020) are not seen as risky by a paternalistic state. In comparison, actions that generate 'easy money' in India – for example, selling body parts such as a kidney to repay debts (Moniruzzaman 2012), renting poor women's wombs for surrogacy (Pande 2014), or female sex work (Kotiswaran 2011) – produce a litany of scorn and accusations.

Such policing extends far beyond South Asia and echoes older forms of persecution. Silvia Federici's classic book *Caliban and the witch* (1998), set in the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe, reveals overlapping processes of accusations against women resulting in witch-hunts that dovetailed with the creation of new enclosures and private property from the commons. Converting the Sundarbans forest into a core area and sanctuary for the purposes of conservation and tourism is the latest manifestation of creating enclosures through 'green grabs' (Fairhead *et al.* 2012). Contemporary crab collectors, much like Federici's 'witches' (see also Federici 2018), are persecuted with the help of building a slow yet incriminatory moral case against them and their livelihoods.

The selective nature of these accusations and the particular temporalities of these moral judgements reveal something about the accused as well as those doing the accusing. In *Ugly feelings*, Sianne Ngai (2005) explores the aesthetics and tempos of negative emotions without reducing them to either an expression of class *ressentiment* or merely a cathartic solution to the different registers of problems they highlight. 'Ugly feelings' generate certain durable affects which are distinct from the more specifically directed, and often sensational, accusations of witchcraft (e.g. Geschiere 2013; Niehaus 1993). They allow us to pay keener attention to the role of gender, caste, and class and reveal how certain moral qualities come to be attached to particular livelihoods and particular classes of people.

Greed accusations in the Sundarbans are more akin to 'ugly feelings' than the charges of witchcraft, as they spawn sentiments of guilt, foster subtle jealousies between neighbours, and break up potential forms of solidarity within communities. Accusations from the Sundarbans, other parts of South Asia, and globally point to the policing of aspirations which attack the individual, their personal morality and choices (see Skeggs 2005), while also being accompanied by rapid structural transformations in the wider political economy (see Federici 2018).

'Green grabs', on the one hand, along with the 'opening up of the Chinese market', on the other, marked, in the words of Zigon (2007: 133), a moment of 'moral breakdown', where implicit moral systems become explicit and can 'shake one out of the everydayness of being moral'. Crab collecting was making more money, and because collectors were facing highly public accusations of greed, they readily reflected aloud on their individual moral motivations. In what follows, I explore the defences offered by the crab collectors themselves, their specific moral categories of need (*aubhav*), habit (*swabhav*), and desire (*chahida*) through which they make sense of and justify their own livelihood. In doing so, I query what it means to lead an immoral life, contrasting the constructed morality that polices what poor crab collectors 'ought not to be' or do not 'deserve' with the moral categories used by the crab collectors themselves.

Notions of a sufficient life, or the defence of the accused

As the full import of the accusation of greed reflects the positionality of Shomit da and the forest rangers, so does a full accounting of the crab collectors' reactions speak to their own position within society. The category of greed has a long genealogy within the moral and mythological universe of the Sundarbans (see Jalais 2010; Stewart 2019). Underlying crab collectors' responses to the accusations of greed was an intricate set of ethico-religious codes put forth by the forest goddess Bonbibi. Bonbibi's mythology – annually enacted by travelling actors in costumes, lasting three continuous nights – centres on a story about a greedy merchant Dhonai (whose name means wealthy) and a widow's son, named Dukhey (meaning sadness). Dhonai sacrifices Dukhey to the tiger-demon Dokkhin Rai in exchange for seven boatloads of honey and wax. Before Dokkhin Rai can devour Dukhey, Bonbibi comes to his rescue and proclaims herself as the saviour of those who enter the forest 'empty handed' (*khali hatien*) and out of need. One of the main tenets of Bonbibi is to not be greedy, and to take only what one needs from the forest in order to care for both the forest and others who depend on it.

While there is much more to be explored in relation to crab collectors' moral observances within the jungle and the accompanying difficulties of following these rules,[11] for now it should suffice to say that it is precisely because of people's veneration of the forest goddess Bonbibi that the accusation of greed is doubly hurtful to the crab collectors: it implies that they are breaking one of the foundational norms that govern the ethos of the forest and their means of eking a livelihood from it.

Two brothers, Pavan and Bikas da, belonging to the lower-caste *Poundra Kshatriya* community, express and embody the experiences and material conditions of many crab collectors. Their grandfather came to the Sundarbans as a young man, fleeing political violence in present-day Bangladesh, during India's partition in 1947. He made a living through fishing, crab collecting, honey collecting, and wage labour for wealthy timber merchants, back when the forest was simply seen as a source of revenue and not the object of conservation. Pavan and Bikas da's father had likewise made a livelihood out of 'doing the jungle', while the brothers have been collecting crabs and fish for the past twenty-five and fifteen years, respectively. Besides a few days of daily wage labour during the monsoon months when they didn't venture into the forest, 'doing the jungle' is the only work the two of them had ever known. Their collective household was also constantly plagued by illness. Much of their income had been spent on medical care, although by the end of 2017 Bikas da had managed to save just enough to buy land for a house. At 37, he was going to be able to provide a separate space for his immediate family for the first time.

Need versus greed

Pavan and Bikas da, even in the context of the island and in the eyes of some of their paddy-cultivating neighbours, were characterized as belonging to poor households. Knowing the material poverty of their daily lives in intimate detail makes any accusation of greed ring hollow. It was hard for me to even raise the idea of greed with the family. However, Pavan and Bikas da, who live close to Shomit da's NGO and tourist lodge, know him well and have heard his speeches several times. When I asked about Shomit da's rhetoric, Pavan da said:

> Shomit Mondol is crazy to think that we 'do the jungle' out of greed (*lobh*). I can't go to work in Kerala [a state in South India] like the others … I have three children here, I want to be with them. Shomit da says he will give us this work, that work, he gives us no work. He said he would give us gas [stoves],

> he hasn't. They just talk. Everything I have is from my own hard work, not from his society [referring to the NGO] … He's always been a big talker. We grew up playing football together in the fields. But now he's become a big man, he runs a business (*byapsa*) and tells us we are being greedy? My kids' books, school uniforms, food, medicines for my father: all of this depends on the jungle. Whatever I have today is because of the jungle (*Ma'r khamor* or the abode of Bonbibi) … There is no other work here, what are we to do? The Forester [Forest Department] won't come and feed our families.

For the sake of his children and parents, Pavan da doesn't want to migrate out of the Sundarbans to work. He feels that the NGO projects are nothing but false promises, and keenly observes the hypocrisy of the better-off, like Shomit da. Aware of the lack of viable livelihood alternatives, crab collectors therefore both are conscious of the moral boundaries of greed, and articulate how their own material circumstances and motivations are grounded in a contrasting ethic, that of need.

Habit and desire

Through a conversation with Kaveri Mridha, we are introduced to another crucial category that negotiates the tension between need and greed in the moral lexicon of the crab collectors. This is the idea of *chahida*, meaning 'desire' or, more literally, 'want'. Here I query what Sundarbans residents considered sufficient, and what forms of living exceeded sufficiency, spilling into habits and desires.

Kaveri Mridha is in her late fifties, and for the past twenty years she has been collecting crabs for a living, which she does due to her lack of alternatives. Unlike Pavan and Bikas da, who find that the autonomy in crab collecting balances out its risks, she wishes she could do something else. However, she has no land, no son, and a husband who had a bad fall more than a decade ago on a construction site and cannot perform wage labour. In addition, both her father and her uncle have been killed in tiger attacks. Tears came to her eyes as she spoke about the dangers of the jungle, the constant fear of being caught by the Forest Department, and the lack of alternatives: 'I do this out of need (*aubhav*), out of the burning of my stomach (*peter jala*) … How can this be called greed (*lobh*)?'

Kaveri di also had clear, contrasting definitions of what it meant to 'do the jungle' out of greed: 'If you are living well (*bhalobhabhey thakcho*) and the household is running (*shangshar cholchey*) without "doing the jungle", and you could carry on fine … but you still insisted on [crab collecting], then this is greed (*lobh*)'. I asked if she thought there were other crab collectors who were going into the jungle out of greed. She said the majority that she knew went out of need and desperation, not out of greed. For some, however, the times of desperation were over, and they continued out of habit (*swabhav*). For Kaveri di, there was a specific moral continuum connecting need and habit: 'If you started when your children were little, you don't have to continue once your sons become older and start earning … If I had a son who was earning and could provide for the family, then do you think I would be going into the jungle?'

Kaveri di established a range of morally sufficient justifications for 'doing the jungle'. If one has a son who is earning, or if someone in the family has a government job, or if they own land to cultivate paddy, then these individuals already have a sufficient life (*jotishto*) and collecting crabs would be greedy. Kaveri di's words emphasize that the relative morality of someone's decision to 'do the jungle' is not static. Their action may be justified at a particular moment, but when their economic circumstances change, and if their action has calcified into habit, the same action may become morally suspect. For Kaveri di, the morality of actions thus needs to be revisited with the changing times.

According to her, the forest goddess Bonbibi encouraged the re-evaluations of notions of need, greed, and excess. Bonbibi espoused an ethic of self-limitation that had to be set by oneself and one's own reflections around household sufficiency and excess.

If the first part of our conversation had already cast doubt on whether there was any clear litmus test for need and greed, the next part complicated these categories even further. I wanted Kaveri di to give me more specific examples of her definition of sufficiency. I told her that I had been living with a household which often wanted to catch as many crabs as they could, and this was because one of the members was unwell and her healthcare costs were exorbitant. Was this also greed? Kaveri di immediately replied, 'This is need, not greed: one's healthcare (*manusher swasth*), children's education (*cheley mer shikha*), and to be able to provide food is all need (*aubhav*)'. What about saving to buy land if one was landless, was that greedy? 'That is not greed, it is desire (*chahida*), but there is a very thin line between greed and desire'.

When I asked her about the difference between the two, she responded:

> If I can wear a Rs 500 [GBP 5] sari but I see someone else wearing a Rs 5000 [GBP 50] sari and I want that, then that is greed. Say on a day I have caught 5 kilos of crab. I feel fine, it is not much but it will do. But then someone else I see on another boat has caught 25 kilos and then suddenly I have a desire to catch more … This is wrong. This is greed. If something was sufficient before, before you saw somebody else has more … then you should think of that as good … If I have a hay roof, tomorrow I will want an alabaster roof and then I will want a brick house (*packa baadi*) and then I will want solar light … this is desire (*chahida*) … In my situation I am going out of the 'burning of the stomach' this is not greed … but tomorrow if I start wanting better saris then it is out of greed.

When I asked whether it was so bad to want better saris, she smiled. Taking my hand in hers, she replied with a contemplative tone, 'No, it is not so bad', and once in a while it was alright, 'but there is no end to desire … which is why I said some desires are okay, some are out of greed, and besides … our opportunities for work aren't increasing but only desire is increasing (*rojgar baadcheyna chahida baadchey*)'. Aspiring for a secure home, good health, money to be able to send one's children to school, and having enough food is part of a sufficient life, a legitimate emotion born out of need and justifying action.

Kaveri di also introduces a third moral category of *chahida*, or desire. For her, some desires, like expensive saris even, are at times acceptable. Other desires fall into the category of greed because they are not necessary, but excessive. Wanting a bigger catch than is necessary, particularly when measuring one's own wealth against others, is such a desire. Kaveri di recognizes that the feeling of wealth is relative to what we already have and what we see our neighbours have and warns that constantly revising and self-reflecting on the idea of 'need' is important because it is a slippery slope towards greed. The line between acceptable desires and greedy desires appears to be born out of feelings of envy (*hingsha*) and comparing oneself to one's neighbour.

Another example of a desire that was acceptable happened to be, counterintuitively, gold jewellery. Lokhi di, who belonged to a landless household, had been paying the village jeweller a monthly instalment for a pair of gold bangles for the past two years. Slightly surprised, I queried her about how this particular expenditure squared with the rest of her household's budgeting. Lokhi di explained that when she got married, she hadn't received any customary jewellery from her in-laws because her husband's family was too poor. Ever since her marriage, her husband had tried to compensate for his parents' inability. It had taken husband and wife several years of carefully saving small amounts to afford a pair of gold bangles. I asked Kaveri di if Lokhi di's gold jewellery

was a necessity too. She explained that this was not a necessity, it was a desire, but an *important* one. Every self-respecting married woman ought to have some gold jewellery. According to Kaveri di, such an expenditure marked a husband and in-laws' respect and regard (*jatno*) for a new bride and married woman.

These themes of consumption loom large in today's ecological crisis (see Guha 2006). What is clear from Sundarbans residents like Kaveri di and others in this article is that crab collectors do not necessarily aspire to have lifestyles like their city-dwelling counterparts, but neither do they want to remain poor. They have a clear notion of how much is enough, or what Princen (2005) calls 'enoughness'. However, their words also reveal a more complex set of wants that exceed any simplistic idea of necessity but are situated in a spectrum of 'desires that are okay'. Several scholars have shown how ideas of well-being and sufficiency go beyond material desires (e.g. Diz 2016; H.L. Moore & Woodcraft 2019; Sen 2004; Singh 2015) but are embedded in the specific contours that provide their lives with dignity. For Kaveri di, Pavan da, Bikas da, and Lokhi di, the ability to provide for their family, be it ailing parents or school-going children, to be able to make a living while being next to family members, or the desire to acquire a pair of customary gold bangles belatedly are all crucial contours of a sufficient life.

It is clear that crab collectors have strongly felt definitions of sufficiency and excess, and moral reflections on the instances when the fine lines of need, greed, and desire blur. However, most visitors to the Sundarbans have access only to people like Shomit da at tourist lodges and are thus fed the narrative that crab collectors shun the 'alternative livelihoods' provided by the NGOs and the government and go into the forest out of greed, risking their lives from tiger attacks. What most outsiders do not have access to are the rich moral thought-worlds of the crab collectors themselves, or their material conditions, or the reasons why they choose not to rear livestock and instead want to continue fishing.

Unsurprisingly, the politics of accusation tends to reify existing social hierarchies, with negative emotions being projected onto and sometimes even embodied by the marginalized, while more positively valued actions become yet another privilege reserved for the elite. Entangled as they are in political and moral economies (Fassin 2009; Palomera & Vetta 2016; Thompson 1971), accusations reveal how individual ethical action comes to be circumscribed, and at times even encapsulated, by more pervasive social forces. Focusing on the economic and political realities of the accused and the accusers sheds light on how moral discourses inevitably emerge from everyday power differentials embedded in very local village hierarchies that are simultaneously connected to a global assemblage of practices and processes.

The environmental politics of the accusation, or who is not called greedy?

Because of the predominance enjoyed by the conservation movement and the Forest Department in representing the Sundarbans externally, the 'greedy crab collector' trope had a near-universal acceptance among all kinds of outsiders. Without any evidence-based limits to carrying capacity or the collateral damage that crab collectors were doing to the forest, the discourse to exclude them hinged on their reckless behaviour. Big and small NGOs in Kolkata and Delhi, government officers in the upper rungs of the Forest Department, tourists, journalists, and researchers – people I met on their visit to the island where I was based, or in Kolkata – all shared the same perception: the excessive greed of crab collectors was leading them to their deaths. I contend that perhaps the conservation movement's embrace of crab collectors as the chief environmental

Figure 6. Decrepit ship vessels transporting toxic fly ash and oil, which often capsize, navigate the same waters as the crab collectors' wooden boats. (Photo: Megnaa Mehtta.)

scapegoat in the Sundarbans is born out of a deep political impotency. Crab collectors are targeted because they are the only ones whom the environmentalists have the political power to constrain.

This becomes apparent when one considers how the environmental footprint of the crab collectors measures up against other, far more egregious anthropogenic threats facing the Sundarbans. Fishing trawlers abound in the sea around the Sundarbans delta and are often caught trespassing in the reserve area. For decades, large container ships transporting oil and highly toxic fly ash (Fig. 6) have travelled through, as have thousands of motorized tourist boats – including luxury cruise ships enabling city-dwellers to consume 'untouched' and 'pristine' nature (see Jalais 2007; Vasan 2018). Since 2017, with investment from the Indian government, Bangladesh has begun building a 320-megawatt coal power plant in Rampal in a part of the Bangladeshi Sundarbans. Above all, coastlines are eroding not just because of sea-level rise but also as a result of mega-infrastructural projects in the wider Bengal delta, such as the dredging and construction of guide walls for ships, the building of concrete embankments, and the increasing number of river dams, including the Farraka barrage, which are curtailing fresh water flow and starving the delta of sediments (Rudra 2018).

All of these are grave threats to the global conservation hotspot. This is a fact that everybody, including the conservationists and higher-ranking Forest Department officials, acknowledges. In interviews at conservation NGOs' headquarters in Kolkata and Delhi, the heads of these organizations never denied the environmental gravity of any of these issues to me. Belinda Wright, the founder and head of the Wildlife Protection Society of India, explained in her Delhi office that in 2001 WPSI filed a writ petition in the High Court of Calcutta vs Union of India, State of West Bengal & Inland Waterways Authority to protect the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve from two

threats. The first was large-scale prawn seed collection and the second was the proposed international shipping lane through the delta. While prawn seed collection was banned, nothing came of the second goal. Their attempts to resist eventually hit a wall. Through a combination of collective shoulder shrugging and the display of their own vulnerability, both civil society and the state write off the systemic environmental threats to the Sundarbans as either too powerful or too bureaucratic to fight against. They told me to direct my questions to some other department in some other building in some other city.

Nevertheless, the era of ecological degradation has amplified the call for ever-more stringent biodiversity conservation (Balmford & Whitten 2003; Dinerstein *et al.* 2020), with some movements seeking to cordon off half of the earth for just nature (E.O. Wilson 2016). In the Sundarbans, the WPA provides the legal foundation to brand the crab collectors as trespassers and 'thieves'. The political exigencies of the conservation movement have meant that it has been a willing participant in vilifying the crab collectors and reproducing the greed trope that provides a moral basis for doing so.

It is true that amidst global warming alarmism and ecological degradation, forests need to be saved, especially mangroves that sequester carbon and provide the habitat for the Royal Bengal tiger. While billions of dollars flood in for biodiversity conservation and climate change resiliency projects, those that bear the 'poison of the accusation and the doom of responsibility' (Latour, Stengers, Tsing & Bubandt 2018: 604) are men and women belonging to the most marginalized groups.

Crab antics?

In tracing how the charge of greed comes to be levelled at some of the poorest and weakest in society, this article has tried to show how the politics of accusation in the Sundarbans is a window into investigating a wide range of contemporary dilemmas. By tracing a longer historical arc all the way up to the contemporary moment, this article has revealed two major shifts in the regimes of value in the region. The first took place in the course of the previous century, wherein from being considered a wasteland the Sundarbans became a natural wonderland (Jalais 2007) and a conservation hotspot that attempts to keep the fishers out of the forest alongside which they reside. The second is a more recent shift in the value chain of mud crabs and the increase in demand from China, which has led to improved material conditions for erstwhile crab collectors. This has generated new value systems and a raft of accusations about greedy crab collectors. Like in the opening epigraph from Peter Wilson (1973), Nirmal da and Shomit da, as members of the local elite, attempt to drag down the Sundarbans' crab collectors from their recent trajectory of upward economic mobility. They police the crab collectors' social and material strivings through the accusation of greed. Closely related, I show how the precise details of the accusations of greed and the minutiae of the defences offered by crab collectors highlight the rich moral thought-worlds of the accused and their reflections on sufficiency, excess, habit, and desire.

Drawing on the anthropological literature on aspirations and ideas of prosperity, my article reveals the specific needs and wants of Sundarbans residents. Crab collectors do not want to remain in poverty, but neither do they have unfettered desires to greedily consume. Instead, I reveal the power of accusations to destabilize as well as restabilize new constellations of what it means to live decently through interrogating and reasserting very precise articulations of sufficiency and excess. Paying keen attention to how moral discourses are constructed and activated, I show how individuals' emotions

and larger value systems, while enmeshed in a local ecology of morals and mythologies, are mutually constitutive of changes in the wider political economy.

Local notions of greed, need, and desire simultaneously become weapons that are co-opted by particular actors, such as local elites, to entrench certain pre-existing divisions and inequalities in society. This unpacking of the accusations of greed – why, when, and how crab collectors come to take on such moral opprobrium – is the first kind of 'crab antics' at the level of the village. Simultaneously, this article has stepped back to emphasize a second form of 'crab antics' which revolves around the selective dimensions of this moral battleground. Why are poor crab collectors targeted while more flagrant environmental threats to the Sundarbans are completely ignored? In answering this question, I point to the political impotency of the conservation movement, and an allied Forest Department, which are indeed unable to confront larger and more fundamental ecological threats. Trapped by an imperative to action, this has led both environmental actors and the state to redirect the material and moral resources meant to combat environmental apocalypse against the most vulnerable.

Without any scientific or ecological basis,[12] environmental and state actors have distorted the discourse of greed in ecologically self-defeating ways that hide their inability to take more politically bold actions. In the short term and at the local level, moral and financial energies are being invested in accusations that place the burden of culpability on the economically weakest: those who ought to be blamed have impunity and are unreachable, so others close at hand, like landless crab collectors, become easy scapegoats.

Here, viewed from a greater distance, the conservation movement and Forest Department are also crabs in the same bucket, trying their hardest to bring down the crab collectors. They, too, are stuck, trapped by the modalities and shortages of political power that surround and limit their scope of action. What deserves and demands attention is the hand that put them there in the first place, which points towards not just the contemporary capitalist forces behind environmental degradation but also the different regimes of value into which these actors have been co-opted. Conservationists and the Forest Department are caught in a knowledge politics that they did not solely create but continue to perpetuate, which asserts the importance of conserving certain lives over others. As this specific genealogy of conservation and of valuing certain forms of life intersects with shifting supply chains, international funding, local moralities, village judgements, and concomitant accusations, I show how diverse actors in a very local setting live by and co-create different moral ecologies.

Every time I left my fieldsite, I was reminded that the delta was sinking due to global warming and sea-level rise caused by outside influences, and the Global North's industrial consumerism (Chakrabarty 2009; Crate 2011; Hornborg 2017; J.W. Moore 2017). But in my field, there was no talk of these larger forces, either 'Western' or those that included India's economic 'boom' with its accompanied infrastructural and environmental pillage. The commercial vessels, trawlers, luxury cruisers, and eroding shoreline went unremarked, hidden in plain sight. Instead, the focus remained on the villainous crab collectors and their venial sins. The impending ecological crisis has generated enormous moral and economic resources, but these are misspent on the most inconsequential environmental threat. It is not that 'we knew everything and did nothing' (Latour *et al.* 2018: 603; see Stengers & Goffey 2015). The 'great derangement' ([Amitav] Ghosh 2016), in my opinion, is worse. We know everything and we are doing something: we are busying ourselves raining moral opprobrium on the poorest and the

weakest. We are staring at the trees while the forest drowns. Could it be that we are all engaging in crab antics?

NOTES

The research for this article is based on a Ph.D. fellowship I received from the London School of Economics and Political Science from 2014 to 2018. In addition, I am grateful for the writing grant made available to me by the ERC Starting Grant 313664, project UNDERINDIA (PI Alpa Shah), from October 2019 to January 2020. I am also grateful for comments on an earlier draft of this article from Laura Bear and Deborah James. In June 2018, along with Geoff Hughes, I co-organized a two-day workshop at the LSE on 'Envy and Greed: Ugly Emotions and the Politics of Accusation', culminating in a Special Issue, for which I co-authored the Introduction, at the *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* (*CJA*). I am grateful for comments from Beverly Skeggs and the late David Graeber, who were discussants of my paper at the workshop, as well as the engagement and comments of other workshop participants. The map in this article is made by Faiza Ahmed Khan and reproduced here with her consent. All photographs included were taken by me. I have taken oral consent from those who appear in the photographs to reproduce them for publication.

[1] In the course of this article, I use short forms of Bengali honorifics: 'da' for 'dada' (meaning older brother) and 'di' for 'didi' (meaning older sister). Furthermore, the names of the individuals and organizations in this article have been changed in order to maintain their anonymity.

[2] Instead of using 'fishermen', I choose to use 'fishers', which refers to both men and women.

[3] This article is based on twenty-two months of long-term ethnographic fieldwork in one of the last inhabited islands of the Sundarbans in Gosaba Block. In addition to participant observation with fishing communities as well as Forest Department rangers, my research led me to interact with a wide range of actors involved in the region's governance. I also conducted a household survey of 126 households from which I have a combination of quantitative data as well as individual migration histories.

[4] For a longer discussion on relative and absolute poverty, see Sen (1983; 1999).

[5] These estimates might be outdated, and official death tolls hard to obtain, but the number of deaths due to wildlife attacks – tigers, crocodiles, and sharks – average at least thirty per year.

[6] *https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2014/07/02/a-resilient-future-for-bangladesh-sundarbans* (accessed 11 May 2021).

[7] JFMCs are government initiatives that began in the 1980s to include forest-dependent communities in forest management.

[8] In contrast to much of the anthropological literature on race-to-the-bottom effects of global value chains, my research suggests that those at the bottom of the crab value chain were moving upwards, albeit to a limited degree. In the context of the Sundarbans, contrary to the argument of Shah *et al*. (2018), capitalist modernity had indeed trickled down to the bottom. Intriguingly, as this article shows, it has done so by creating a backlash against the upwardly mobile poor.

[9] Shomit da's salary from the NGO that employs him was at the time of fieldwork Rs 20,000 (GBP 2,000) a month. He had two other sources of income through his tourist boats and the rent he received for the land leased out to the NGO and tourist lodge. For a comparative perspective, other local elite members include government employees. A government primary school teacher makes Rs 18,000 (GBP 1,800); their high school counterparts make Rs 28,000 (GBP 2,800).

[10] In 2019, the value of mud crabs exported in India was GBP 106 million (*https://www.zauba.com/exportanalysis-mud+crab/unit-KGS-report.html*, accessed 12 May 2021).

[11] My article under review entitled 'Conserving life: divine and daily forest governance in the Sundarban of India' details the importance of sacred formations in the region and the 'rules of the jungle' (*jongoler niyam*) in relating to the forest landscape.

[12] To be clear, I am not saying that a 'scientific study' would necessarily create more legitimacy. 'Scientific expertise' and the notions of degradation and risk are themselves constructed and embedded in a particular knowledge politics and often disregard other ways of understanding, knowing, and valuing landscapes (see Leach, Scoones & Thompson 2002). Nevertheless, it was revealing to know that such an attempt to understand the carrying capacity of the Sundarbans had not been made.

REFERENCES

Ali, T.O. 2018. *A local history of global capital: jute and peasant life in the Bengal delta*. Princeton: University Press.

Appadurai, A. 2004. The capacity to aspire: culture and the terms of recognition. In *Culture and public action* (eds) V. Rao & M. Walton, 59-84. Stanford: University Press.

Balmford, A. & T. Whitten 2003. Who should pay for tropical conservation, and how could the costs be met? *Oryx* **37**, 238-50.
Barrios, R.E. 2017. What does catastrophe reveal for whom? The anthropology of crises and disasters at the onset of the Anthropocene. *Annual Review of Anthropology* **46**, 151-66.
Bear, L. 2015. *Navigating austerity: currents of debt along a South Asian river*. Stanford: University Press.
Bhattacharyya, D. 2018. *Empire and ecology in the Bengal delta*. Cambridge: University Press.
——— & M. Mehtta 2020. Is the managed retreat plan for the Sundarbans misguided? *The Diplomat*, 5 September (available online: *https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/is-the-managed-retreat-plan-for-the-sundarbans-misguided/*, accessed 24 May 2021).
Brockington, D. 2002. *Fortress conservation: the preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve, Tanzania*. London: International African Institute in association with James Currey.
Chakrabarty, D. 2009. The climate of history: four theses. *Critical Inquiry* **35**, 197-222.
Coffey, D. & D.E. Spears 2017. *Where India goes: abandoned toilets, stunted development and the costs of caste*. New Delhi: HarperCollins India.
Comaroff, J. & J. Comaroff 2002. Alien-nation: zombies, immigrants, and millennial capitalism. *South Atlantic Quarterly* **101**, 779-805.
Cons, J. 2018. Staging climate security: resilience and heterodystopia in the Bangladesh borderlands. *Cultural Anthropology* **33**, 266-94.
Corbridge, S., G. Williams, M. Srivastava & V. René 2005. *Seeing the state: governance and governmentality in India*. Cambridge: University Press.
Corsín Jiménez, A. 2008. *Culture and well-being: anthropological approaches to freedom and political ethics*. London: Pluto Press.
Crate, S.A. 2011. Climate and culture: anthropology in the era of contemporary climate change. *Annual Review of Anthropology* **40**, 175-94.
de Angelis, M. & D. Harvie 2014. The commons. In *The Routledge companion to alternative organizations* (eds) M. Parker, G. Cheney, V. Fournier & C. Land, 280-94. Abingdon: Routledge.
Dewan, C. 2021. *Misreading the Bengal delta: climate change, development, and livelihoods in coastal Bangladesh*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
Dinerstein, E., A.R. Joshi, C. Vynne, *et al*. 2020. A 'global safety net' to reverse biodiversity loss and stabilize earth's climate. *Science Advances* **6**: **36** (available online: *https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abb2824*, accessed 24 May 2021).
Diz, A. 2016. The afterlife of abundance: wageless life, politics, and illusion among the Guaraní of the Argentine Chaco. Ph.D. dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science.
Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1976 [1937]. *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande* (ed. E. Gillies). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Fairhead, J., M. Leach & I. Scoones 2012. Green grabbing: a new appropriation of nature? *Journal of Peasant Studies* **39**, 237-61.
Fassin, D. 2009. Moral economies revisited. *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* **64**, 1237-66.
Federici, S. 1998. *Caliban and the witch: women, the body and primitive accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia.
——— 2018. *Witches, witch-hunting, and women*. New York: PM Press.
Gadgil, M. & R. Guha 1995. *Ecology and equity: the use and abuse of nature in contemporary India*. London: Routledge.
Geschiere, P. 2013. *Witchcraft, intimacy, and trust: Africa in comparison*. Chicago: University Press.
Ghosh, A[ditya] 2017. *Sustainability conflicts in coastal India: hazards, changing climate and development discourses in the Sundarbans*. New York: Springer.
Ghosh, A[mitav] 2016. *The great derangement: climate change and the unthinkable*. Chicago: University Press.
Guha, R. 2006. *How much should a person consume? Environmentalism in India and the United States*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Gupta, A. 2012. *Red tape: bureaucracy, structural violence, and poverty in India*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
Harriss-White, B. 2020. Waste, social order, and physical disorder in small-town India. *Journal of Development Studies* **56**, 239-58.
Hazra, S, T. Ghosh, R. Dasgupta & G. Sen 2002. Sea level and associated changes in the Sundarbans. *Science and Culture* **68**, 309-21.

Hornborg, A. 2017. Dithering while the planet burns: anthropologists' approaches to the Anthropocene. *Reviews in Anthropology* **46**: **2–3**, 61-77.
Hughes, G., M. Mehtta, C. Bresciani & S. Strange 2019. Introduction: Envy and greed: ugly emotions and the politics of accusation. *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* **37**: **2**, 1-20.
Hunter, W.W. 1973 [1875]. *A statistical account of Bengal, vol. I: Districts of the 24 Parganas and the Sundarbans*. New Delhi: D.K. Publishing House.
Jalais, A. 2007. The Sundarbans: whose World Heritage Site? *Conservation and Society* **5**, 335-42.
——— 2008. Unmasking the cosmopolitan tiger. *Nature and Culture* **3**, 25-40.
——— 2010. *Forest of tigers: people, politics and environment in the Sundarbans*. London: Routledge.
——— 2017. Bonbibi and Kali in rival riverine chronicles from the Sundarbans. In *Living with water: peoples, lives and livelihoods in Asia and beyond* (ed.) R. Mukherjee, 127-45. New Delhi: Primus Books.
James, D. 2014. *Money from nothing: indebtedness and aspiration in South Africa*. Stanford: University Press.
Khan, N. 2014. Dogs and humans and what earth can be: filaments of Muslim ecological thought. *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* **4**, 245-64.
——— 2019. At play with the giants: between the patchy Anthropocene and romantic geology. *Current Anthropology* **60**: **S20**, S333-41.
Kotiswaran, P. 2011. *Dangerous sex, invisible labor: sex work and the law in India*. Princeton: University Press.
Latour, B., I. Stengers, A. Tsing & N. Bubandt 2018. Anthropologists are talking – about capitalism, ecology, and apocalypse. *Ethnos* **83**, 587-606.
Leach, M., I. Scoones & L. Thompson 2002. Citizenship, science and risk. *IDS Bulletin* **33**: **2**, 1-12.
Martin, J.R. 1837. *Notes on the medical topography of Calcutta*. Calcutta: G.H. Huttmann, Bengal Military Orphan Press.
Moniruzzaman, M. 2012. 'Living cadavers' in Bangladesh: bioviolence in the human organ bazaar. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* **26**, 69-91.
Moore, H.L. 2015. Global prosperity and Sustainable Development Goals. *Journal of International Development* **27**, 801-15.
——— & S. Woodcraft 2019. Understanding prosperity in East London: local meanings and 'sticky' measures of the good life. *City & Society* **31**, 275-98.
Moore, J.W. 2017. Capitalocene, part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis. *Journal of Peasant Studies* **44**, 594-630.
Mukhopadhyay, A. 2016. *Living with disasters: communities and development in the Indian Sundarbans*. Cambridge: University Press.
Ngai, S. 2005. *Ugly feelings*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
Niehaus, I.A. 1993. Witch-hunting and political legitimacy: continuity and change in Green Valley, Lebowa, 1930-91. *Africa* **63**, 498-530.
Oka, R. & I. Kuijt 2014. Greed is bad, neutral, and good: a historical perspective on excessive accumulation and consumption. *Economic Anthropology* **1**, 30-48.
Palomera, J. & T. Vetta 2016. Moral economy: rethinking a radical concept. *Anthropological Theory* **16**, 413-32.
Pande, A. 2014. *Wombs in labor: transnational commercial surrogacy in India*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Paprocki, K. 2019. All that is solid melts into the bay: anticipatory ruination and climate change adaptation. *Antipode* **51**, 295-315.
Paul, K.B. & M. Baindur 2016. Leopold's land ethic in the Sundarbans: a phenomenological approach. *Environmental Ethics* **38**, 307-25.
Princen, T. 2005. *The logic of sufficiency*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
Robertson, A.F. 2001. *Greed: gut feelings, growth, and history*. Cambridge: Polity.
Rudra, K. 2018. *Rivers of the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta: a fluvial account of Bengal*. New York: Springer.
Sahlins, M. 1972. *Stone Age economics*. London: Aldine-Atherton.
Sanyal, P. 2001. Man-eating tigers of Indian Sundarban. *A West Bengal Government English Fortnightly* **XLIII**: **20**, 26-32.
Sen, A. 1983. *Poor, relatively speaking*. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.
——— 1999. *Development as freedom*. Oxford: University Press.

——— 2004. Why we should preserve the spotted owl. *London Review of Books*, 5 February (available online: *https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v26/no3/amartya-sen/why-we-should-preserve-the-spotted-owl*, accessed 12 May 2021).

Shah, A., J. Lerche, R. Axelby, D. Benbabaali, B. Donegan, J. Raj & V. Thakur 2018. *Ground down by growth: tribe, caste, class and inequality in twenty-first-century India*. London: Pluto Press.

Singh, B. 2010. Ascetism and eroticism in Gandhi, Thoreau and Nietzsche: an essay in geo-philosophy. *Borderlands: Special Issue on Religion and Sexuality* **9**: **3**, 1-34.

——— 2015. *Poverty and the quest for life: spiritual and material striving in rural India*. Chicago: University Press.

Skeggs, B. 2005. The making of class and gender through visualizing moral subject formation. *Sociology* **39**, 965-82.

Stengers, I. & A. Goffey 2015. *In catastrophic times: resisting the coming barbarism*. Paris: Open Humanities Press.

Stewart, T.K. 2019. *Witness to marvels: Sufism and literary imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sur, M. 2021. *Jungle passports: fences, mobility, and citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh border*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Thompson, E.P. 1971. The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century. *Past & Present* **50**, 76-136.

Vasan, S. 2018. Consuming the tiger: experiencing neoliberal nature. *Conservation and Society* **16**, 481-92.

Wacquant, L.J.D. 2009. *Punishing the poor: the neoliberal government of social insecurity*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

West, P., J. Igoe & D. Brockington 2006. Parks and peoples: the social impact of protected areas. *Annual Review of Anthropology* **35**, 251-77.

Wilson, E.O. 2016. *Half-earth: our planet's fight for life*. New York: Norton.

Wilson, P.J. 1973. *Crab antics: social anthropology of English-speaking Negro societies of the Caribbean*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Zigon, J. 2007. Moral breakdown and the ethical demand: a theoretical framework for an anthropology of moralities. *Anthropological Theory* **7**, 131-50.

Panier de crabes et montée des eaux : économie morale et politique de la « cupidité » dans les Sundarbans indiennes

Résumé

La pêche aux crabes, moyen de subsistance pratiqué depuis des générations dans la forêt des Sundarbans, en Inde, se heurte depuis quelques années à une forte remise en cause sur le plan moral. Les pêcheurs de crabes, sans terre pour la plupart, sont désormais fréquemment accusés publiquement par les autorités locales de cupidité et de mise en danger irresponsable de tout un écosystème. Tandis que la cupidité et la nécessité, qui sont apparentées, émergent d'une écologie morale locale, des campagnes de protection à financement international, ainsi que de récentes perturbations dans la chaîne logistique mondiale du crabe, révèlent comment les accusations sont activées et quels sont les moyens par lesquels elles opèrent dans les hiérarchies villageoises préexistantes. Cet article explique les changements politiques, économiques et moraux qui sous-tendent ces accusations. L'autrice vient contraster ces dernières en présentant les arguments de la défense ; elle explore ce qui constitue pour les pêcheurs de crabes une vie satisfaisante, ainsi que les nuances morales sophistiquées qu'ils perçoivent entre la cupidité (*lobh*), la nécessité (*aubhav*), le désir (*chahida*) et l'habitude (*swabhav*). Elle prend ensuite le recul nécessaire pour révéler les grands contours politiques qui façonnent le débat autour des pêcheurs de crabes « cupides ». Elle avance que les défenseurs de l'environnement et leurs alliés au sein de l'État ont détourné les ressources matérielles et morales censées combattre le dérèglement climatique et autres menaces sur l'environnement, en désignant comme boucs émissaires les laissés-pour-compte du débat politique : les petits pêcheurs locaux. De puissantes parties prenantes, devant leur propre impuissance, s'en donnent à cœur joie dans un véritable panier de crabes, incapables de réagir à la vraie catastrophe environnementale, allant jusqu'à faire porter aux pauvres le fardeau psychique de la cupidité.

Megnaa Mehtta is an environmental anthropologist with an interest in values, emotions, mythologies, and ideas of well-being, as they intersect with debates in global conservation and political ecology. As a

Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Sheffield, she is currently working on her book manuscript, tentatively titled *Conserving life: political imaginaries from a submerging forest*.

Sheffield Institute for International Development (SIID), Interdisciplinary Centre of the Social Sciences, University of Sheffield, 219 Portobello, Broomhall, Sheffield S1 4DP, UK. m.mehtta@sheffield.ac.uk